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ABSTRACT

Child care services in Sweden are distinguished by a high standard of quality and by the fundamental principle that they exist for all children. This governmental fact sheet provides useful facts and figures on Swedish child care law and government policy. It is divided into 16 sections covering: (1) rights of children and their families; (2) parenthood and employment; (3) child care legislation; (4) recent changes in child care ideology and practical activities; (5) the spectrum of available child care and activities by age group; (6) day care centers; (7) part-time groups; (8) open preschool; (9) family day care; (10) care services for school children; (11) children requiring special support; (12) children from other cultures; (13) educational programs for preschools and leisure-time centers; (14) child care staff training and certification; (15) in-hospital child care services; and (16) child care development support, follow-up, and evaluation. The fact sheet notes that child care, along with parental insurance and child allowances, is a cornerstone of Swedish family policy and law. Parents are granted work leave-of-absence for childbirth and child illness, and receive compensation for lost work time. Children have access to child care amenities from the age of 12 months, and they qualify for child allowance up through age 18. These rights lie behind one of the highest birthrates in Western Europe, coupled with the highest employment participation rate for mothers of infant children. (ET)

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Child Care in Sweden

Child care is one of the cornerstones of Swedish family policy, together with parental insurance and child allowances.

Swedish law entitles parents to leave of absence from work, with a high rate of loss of earnings compensation, in connection with their children's birth and illnesses. The children have access to child care amenities from the age of 12 months, and they qualify for a monthly child allowance up to and including age 18.

These rights lie behind one of the highest birthrates in Western Europe, coupled with the highest employment participation rate for mothers of infant children.

Some of the policy measures for children and their families

Other important rights of households with children include free maternity health care throughout pregnancy, free health care for pre-school children, free health care all through school and free dental care up to and including age 19.

With effect from 1997 at the latest, children will be entitled to start school at age six if their parents so desire, but at present the majority still wait until they are seven.

Parents are responsible for their children until age 18, or longer if the children are still attending school. Other rights of importance to children include the right of continued contact with both parents after a divorce and, as a general principle, the sharing of custody between divorced parents. The custodial parent is guaranteed monthly financial support in the form of a maintenance advance paid by the other parent or by the State. Sweden has a high divorce rate—45% of marriages are dissolved—but 80% of pre-school children live with both parents.

Swedish law prohibits corporal punishment, and Sweden has ratified the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child.

The Office of the Children's Ombudsman was set up in July 1993 for the purpose of safeguarding the social rights of children and young persons up to the age of 18. The Ombudsman has the task of ensuring that the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child is respected in Sweden, as well as promoting good formative conditions, a good psychosocial environment and a good standard of child safety.

There is also a voluntary organisation, the Swedish Society for the Protection of Children's Rights in the Community (BRIS). Among other things this organisation runs a children's helpline, which children can phone for support and advice on where to get help with their difficulties.

Parenthood and employment

For many years now, Swedish family policy has concentrated on enabling both men and women to combine parenthood with gainful employment. This endeavour is prompted both by concern for the rising generation and by the pursuit of equality between the sexes.

When a child is born, the law entitles the parents to leave of absence from work. In the spring of 1994, after much intense debate, the Riksdag approved a number of changes in the parental insurance system. From 1 July 1994, a parent will be entitled to stay at home with a child for a period of 360 days (previously 450) whilst receiving *parental benefit*. This benefit is paid at 90 % of normal income (80 % from 1 January 1995) and can be used at any time before the child's eighth birthday.

In 1992, fathers made up 44 % of those taking parental leave during the child's first year of life; on average they took 45 days. From 1 January 1995, one month of parental leave will be reserved specifically for fathers.

A further change in the system, from 1 July 1994, is the introduction of a *child care allowance* of SEK 2,000 per month for all children aged between one and three years. For children with a place in municipal or private child care, this sum is reduced (or withheld entirely) according to, respectively, the number of hours of attendance or the level of fees. The child care allowance is taxable.

Children play outdoors even in the coldest weather. Albert Håkansson/Pressens Bild

As before, parents are also entitled, for up to 120 days annually, to leave of absence from work at 90 % (from 1 January 1995, 80 %) of normal income, when their children are ill. This applies to children up to and including the age of 12, and in the case of disabled children up to and including age 21. The existence of this right is a factor of security for households with children, though in practice little more than half of all parents need to exercise it, and those doing so take, on average, nine days off annually for looking after sick children.

Parents of children aged between 4 and 12 are similarly entitled to two "contact days" off work, again with financial compensation, so that they can accompany their children to school or day care centre etc. Parents of disabled children are entitled to ten such contact days every year.

Most parents return to work at the end of their parental leave. The majority of Swedish households with children regard child care amenities as a natural adjunct to the family. Without those amenities it would not be possible for some 81% of mothers with children under 13 to go out to work (1992). In 1992, 78% of mothers of pre-school children aged 0–6 were gainfully employed. A large proportion of mothers work part time, i.e. less than 40 hours a week.

In December 1993 the Swedish Parliament *(Riksdagen)* expanded the Social Services Act in such a way that, from 1995, it will be the duty of municipal authorities to provide day care centre or family day care places for children between the ages of 1 and 6 years, and to provide some form of care before and after school for children aged 6–12, if the parents are gainfully employed or studying.

Children aged up to 12 years constituted over 16% of Sweden's population in 1992, and not quite 10% were under the age of 7. A large proportion of pre-school children already attend child care amenities (see table 1). About 70% of children aged up to 6, and about 37% of those aged 7–12, with both parents gainfully employed, are enrolled with child care services.

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Planning the new day. Maud Nycander/MIRA

Child care—a recent innovation

Section 12 of the Social Services Act defines the responsibilities of municipal authorities towards children and young persons: "The social welfare committee shall endeavour to ensure that children and young persons grow up in good and secure conditions, [and it shall] act in close co-operation with families to promote the comprehensive personal development and the favourable physical and social development of children and young persons...".

Child care services in Sweden are distinguished by a high standard of quality and by the fundamental principle that they exist for all children. Children who, on account of physical or mental disability or for some other reason, are in need of special support are entitled to a place in regular child care services and, if necessary, are allotted special back-up resources.

The expanded child care legislation coming into force in 1995 represents a closer statutory definition of requirements concerning staff training, the appropriate size and composition of groups and suitable facilities. The amended legislation also requires the municipality to make child care services available "without unreasonable delay" after parents have applied for them.

Child care services in Sweden have undergone a very rapid evolution. In the 1960s they were still a very small branch of activity serving very few children. Since then the number of places has multiplied almost fifty times, and child care services now make up 2.4% of GDP.

Many changes

Organisationally too, child care services have developed rapidly, and the past few years have brought a number of big changes in terms of both ideology and practical activities.

During the build-up years, child care services were under strong central control, exerted through State grants and through the norms and guidelines issued by the supervisory authority, the National Board of Health and Welfare. The 286 municipalities are responsible for activities and have been accountable to the State, through special child care service plans (up to and including 1994), for the expansion of these services and for meeting demand.

State grants have been used as an inducement for expansion, and also as a means of steering activities. At one time, for example, special grants were paid to municipalities which also provided child care in the evenings and at night.

Central norms and guidelines existed to guarantee a minimum standard of quality, e.g. as regards premises, staff training, the number of children per group and the content of activities. As a result, child care services were fairly uniform everywhere in the country.

Political developments in recent years have been generally characterised by the abolition of State controls, norms and restrictions in favour of greater decentralisation. Special State grants for child care services have been superseded by general grants for all municipal activities. The role of the National Board of Health and Welfare has changed from that of controlling and inspecting child care services to the follow-up and evaluation of activities.

At municipal level, the organisation of child care and education services has been brought closer together.

Virtually all child care services used to be municipal, but today they can also be provided, with municipal funding support, by co-operatives, foundations, limited companies and other bodies. This development has been spurred by the political principle of allowing people greater liberty to choose their own child care arrangements. The proportion of private child care has grown steadily in the past five years and in 1992 totalled 7% of all child care services, indeed up to 18% in some municipalities. Parental co-operatives are the commonest form of private child care.

Child care services expanded during a period of good economic growth. In recent years, municipalities have sometimes been forced to make heavy spending cuts, partly at the expense of child care services and schools.

As a consequence of all this, the organisation and design of child care services today are subject to great local variations. Generally speaking, municipal spending cuts have tended to result in larger groups and lower staffing ratios. This in turn has inspired misgivings about the prospects of upholding standards and about the impact of municipal retrenchment on activities for children and young persons.

The municipal share of child care expenditure has grown in recent years and the percentage covered by state grants has diminished. In 1992, about one-third of child care costs were covered by State grants and about 11% by parental payments. In the same year, personnel costs represented 73% of total municipal expenditure on child care services.

Child care today

Child care comprises educational activities and care, either full-time or part-time, for children aged up to six years and, for children aged between 6 and 12, to a varying extent, as an adjunct to school.

Pre-school children can attend day care centre, family day care, "part-time group" or "open pre-school". In 1992, 96% of all 6-year-olds, 63% of 5-year-olds and 58% of 4-year-olds were attending a day care centre or part-time group.

For schoolchildren there are leisure time centres, family day care and open leisure time activities.

Demand for child care services has always exceeded supply. Despite heavy expansion, the shortfall has increased in recent years, due partly to the rising birth-rate. Births in Sweden are running at just over 100,000 annually (total population approximately 8.7 million in 1993). In 1993, there were still more than 50,000 children without child care (about 8% of the pre-school population), which means that some families have to put their names down on the waiting list and either delay returning to work or make other, temporary arrangements.

Day care centres

Day care centres are for children aged up to six years whose parents are gainfully employed or studying. They are also for children requiring special support. Both educational activities and practical care are provided. For example, between two and three meals are served every day.

Children are enrolled at day care centre and remain so up until school age, as long as their parents are working or studying.

Day care centres are the form of child care which has expanded most up until now, and 38% of all children up to the age of six years are looked after in this way.

Most day care centres have between one and four groups of children, though some have many more. Children used mainly to be grouped by age, but "sibling groups" became common practice in the seventies and eighties. These are mixed-age groups of children up to six or twelve years old, or alternatively there can be one group for the youngest children and a sibling group for those aged over three. In the past few years some pre-schools have begun reverting to age grouping, and today one can find many different grouping arrangements.

Previously there would be 12–15 children to a group, but figures now vary considerably and most groups have more than 15 children, some of them up to 24. In 1993, 40% of the youngest children (aged up to 3 years) were in groups of 15 or more, and about one in every three day care centre departments had 18 or more children.

Staffing ratios have thus diminished. Although child numbers have increased, there are still generally about three adults per group, and in some cases only two.

More than half the personnel are qualified pre-school teachers or recreation instructors, and 40% are child care attendants. The proportion of pre-school teachers has grown steadily.

Children attend day care centres either full time or part time. Opening hours are more variable than they used to be. Day care centres in rural areas are open, on average, between 8 and 12.5 hours daily. Evening and night-time child care services exist on only a small scale, but then demand is limited.

Parents pay a monthly charge for a place at a day care centre, related usually to the length of time the child spends there, to parental earnings and to the number of children in the family. Charges have risen steeply in recent years and can differ widely from one municipality to another.

Part-time groups

Part-time groups exist for children between the ages of 4 and 6 who do not require all-day care. They provide three hours' activity daily for enrolled children. This service is intended for families where one parent is not gainfully employed or studying, or else for children in family day care. Part-time pre-schools are closed in summer and observe other school holidays.

Child care in 1992, percent

Children aged 15 months–3 years	
Day care centre/ family day care	56 %
Parent at home	36 %
Parent itself childminder	3 %
Private care	3 %
Other or no data	2 %
Children aged 4–6years	
Day care centre/ family day care	65 %
Parent at home	27 %
Parent itself childminder	4 %
Private care	2 %
Other or no data	2 %

(Source: Child care study 1992)

Part-time pre-schools usually comprise two groups with about 20 children each—one in the morning and one in the afternoon—taken by a pre-school teacher and a child care attendant.

Attendance at a part-time pre-school is free of charge for six-year-olds.

Part-time pre-school activities have diminished heavily in recent years.

Open pre-school

For stay-at-home parents or childminders and their children there is a drop-in form of activity for social and educational stimulus, known as the open pre-school. This is a relatively new kind of activity. The first open pre-school was started in 1972. They were encouraged by State grants, and the number of open pre-schools grew steadily up to and including 1991. In 1992 Sweden had about 1,500 open pre-schools altogether, which on average makes about five per municipality.

An open pre-school can be open from one to five days a week, and for anything between a few hours and all day. Parents or childminders with their pre-school children come and go as they please. An open pre-school is usually staffed by a pre-school teacher and a child care attendant. In some municipalities a social welfare officer is also on duty at certain times, for the benefit of parents requiring help with social matters.

The main purpose of the open pre-school is to provide parents and childminders with a meeting point and to give them the opportunity, together with pre-school teachers, of developing educational activities for the children. Very often, the open pre-school is a hub of social contact for young families in the area. This can mean a very great deal to parents who are at home full-time or on parental leave.

Family day care

Family day care means a childminder looking after children aged up to 12, usually in the minder's own home, while the parents are at work or studying. Children in need of special support are also looked after in this way.

Childminders can have groups ranging from a few children to about ten of various ages, their own children included, often at different times of the day.

The proportion of children in family day care has gradually declined with the expansion of municipal day care centres and leisure time centre activities; over the past ten years, numbers have fallen by half. In 1993, family day care constituted 23% of caring services for pre-school children and 42% for schoolchildren.

Care services for schoolchildren

The need for child care services after school and in school holidays was observed in the 1970s, when surveys revealed that one out of every five children between the ages of 7 and 12 had no contact with any adults between the end of the school day and the parents' return home from work.

Leisure time centres are a form of child care for which schoolchildren are enrolled. The length of time for which they can retain their places varies from one municipality to another, but many municipalities have now reduced the age limit from twelve down to nine or even seven. In only one-third of all municipalities, children can keep their places up to and including age twelve.

The number of leisure time centres has expanded since the 1970s, but at nothing like the same rate as day care centres. It is still only a minority of children of the relevant ages who are catered for in this way—altogether about 40% of 7–9 year-olds and about 6% of 10–12 year-olds in 1992. There are big differences here from one municipality to another.

Leisure time centres are staffed by recreation instructors and child care attendants. They can be open both before and after school and in school holidays. Like day care centres, they provide a combination of educational activity and practical care. Light meals are served, e.g. breakfast and snacks. Parents pay a monthly charge. Charges vary a great deal from one municipality to another, but generally speaking they have risen steeply in the past few years.

Leisure time centres have undergone great changes in recent years. The aim in most municipalities is to integrate them with the schools, so as to achieve closer co-operation between teachers and recreation instructors, whereas previously the two kinds of activity were for the most part completely separate. Meanwhile the number of children per group has increased considerably, staffing ratios have declined and there are greater differences between municipalities than there used to be. Today there can be anything from 20 to nearly 40 children per group, with varying numbers of staff.

For older children who can no longer attend leisure time centres, there is usually, though not always, some other form of leisure activity, such as the "leisure club". This is an afternoon activity for children aged 9–12, giving them the opportunity of going in for various leisure pursuits with other children and with adult help available. Children also enrol with leisure clubs, and parents pay a charge for the service, though not so much as for a leisure time centre.

Some municipalities also have drop-in leisure time activities in the afternoons for schoolchildren who do not attend a leisure time centre. In some municipalities a charge is payable for every visit, while in others the amenity is free of charge.

Children requiring special support

Child care services have a special responsibility towards children who, for physical, mental or other reasons, require special support for their development. The law guarantees these children access to child care services, and in most cases they join ordinary groups in regular child care.

There are also special groups where perhaps half the children have some kind of disability. These groups are mostly smaller and the staff have had special training or experience of children requiring special support.

There are separate special groups, staffed by persons with a knowledge of sign language, for children who are deaf or hard of hearing. Special groups also exist, for example, for children with delayed language development or psychosocial difficulties, so as to provide them with expert developmental support.

In 1994 Sweden acquired a new law, the Act concerning Support and Service for Persons with Certain Functional Impairments, LSS for short, which guarantees special rights to children with severe functional impairments. On certain conditions, these children are entitled, for example, to a personal assistant in child care, and also in the home.

Most municipalities have laid down special guidelines for offering children the support they need in child care services. There are various forms of support. Sometimes the regular experienced staff will suffice, with backing from experts on a particular disability or with the consulting services of psychologists. Many municipalities also have "educational facilitators", most of them experienced pre-school teachers who have undergone further training as remedial teachers or in-service training for the teaching of children in need of special support. These facilitators work in various ways, but most often they have the task of supporting and guiding the permanent staff with reference to a particular child or group of children presenting educational difficulties.

Children from other cultures

In the space of a few decades, Sweden has been transformed from a fairly homogeneous country to a multi-cultural society in which more than 140 different language groups are represented. This has also left its mark on child care, with about 12% of the children having non-Swedish backgrounds and speaking some other language than Swedish in their homes. There are some areas where the proportion of immigrant children is far higher, and there are housing estates where most of the children catered for by child care services have parents from another country.

Ever since the mid-1970s, it has been the aim of Swedish immigrant policy to give people from other cultures the opportunity of preserving and developing their language and culture, while at the same time playing an active part in Swedish society.

Where child care services are concerned, this implies the aim of contributing towards active bilingualism among children and strengthening the development of a dual cultural identity. Among other things, this means giving such children the opportunity of developing their Swedish and their mother tongue simultaneously. In 1975 Parliament laid down the policy that all children with a mother tongue ("home language") other than Swedish were to be entitled to support in that language, both in school and in pre-school. This became a statutory right in school, though not in pre-school.

Even so, most municipalities have offered home language support at pre-school level. This has been done by setting up groups in day care centres for children from the same language group, with bilingual staff, or by arranging for home language teachers to visit the children in pre-school once or twice a week for activities in the mother tongue.

The number of immigrant and refugee children catered for by child care services has increased uninterruptedly during the 1980s and 1990s, but the proportion of children receiving home language support

has not grown at the same rate. On average in 1992, one out of every three immigrant and refugee children was receiving home language support in child care services. This is due above all to municipal spending cuts, and it has led to big differences between municipalities in this respect.

The content of activities

During the 1980s the National Board of Health and Welfare was commissioned by the Government to draw up recommended educational programmes for pre-schools and leisure time centres. These programmes define a number of basic principles concerning children's development and learning and the tasks of child care services:

The aim of pre-school, briefly, is to give children ample and comprehensive opportunity to develop their emotional and intellectual resources and become open, considerate individuals capable of empathy and co-operation with others, and of learning to seek knowledge for themselves and to form their own opinions.

- Child care must be an adjunct to the home and co-operation with parents is important.
- Children learn all the time and in every context, and so caring is also an important part of the general educational approach.
- The educational practices applied must emanate from children's own experience and previous knowledge.
- Child care services must give children a general introduction to natural history, culture and society and must give them an opportunity of perceiving the wholeness and interrelationships of existence. A thematic working approach is therefore employed, so that the children can explore and learn more about a particular subject in many different ways: by reading and listening to stories, by using all their senses in role play, dance and movement, in various kinds of creative activity and so forth.
- Group play is important for children's learning and development.

The National Board of Health and Welfare has also compiled a guide to working with children in family day care, children requiring special support and older children (ages 4–6) in child care services.

Child care staff

Swedish child care services have four main staff categories: pre-school teachers, recreation instructors, child care attendants and childminders. 96% of all those working in child care have formal child care qualifications of one kind or another, and just over half of all employees are graduates.

The training for pre-school teachers and recreation instructors takes the form of two-and-a-half years' of post-secondary study. The main emphasis of this training is on theory, but tutored practical training is also included. The studies include developmental psychology, pedagogics, methodology and, for example, music and other creative activities.

Child care attendant training, at upper secondary school level, is of three years' duration.

Most childminders have taken a short training programme provided by the municipality (ranging in duration from a few weeks to a full term), but increasing numbers are qualified child care attendants and some are also qualified pre-school teachers.

Children in hospital

Children in hospital are also entitled to educational activities and schooling. Sweden has been a pioneer and a driving force as regards access, for example, to play therapy, pre-school education and leisure time centre activities in hospital. Under this type of arrangement, staff with teaching qualifications provide the children with developmental stimulus and support, prepare them for various kinds of medical examination and treatment, explain, in terms which the children can understand, what is happening to them, and give the children an opportunity of processing their experiences through play and creative activity.

Play therapy was available in all paediatric departments of Swedish hospitals in 1992, and yet only about half the children have access to this therapy, because many of them are treated in adult departments. Play therapy too has been affected by spending cuts.

Development, follow-up and evaluation

Ever since the mid-1980s, the State has been supporting child care development through special project grants. These grants have resulted in progress, e.g. as regards pedagogics for older schoolchildren, children in need of special support, immigrant and refugee children and others. Priority has also been given to such fields as co-operation between school and pre-school, new forms of care for schoolchildren, pedagogics for environmental education and culture for children.

The task of observing and evaluating child care services devolves on the National Board of Health and Welfare. As part of that task, work is in progress on formulating and testing qualitative criteria and other instruments for observing and evaluating developments in an increasingly diversified child care sector.

For further information please contact:
The Swedish Embassy or Consulate in your country (in the U.S.: The Swedish Information Service, One Dag Hammarskjold Plaza, New York, N.Y. 10017-2201)

THE SWEDISH INSTITUTE
Box 7434, S-103 91 Stockholm, Sweden
Office: Sverigehuset (Sweden House), Hamngatan/Kungsträdgården, Stockholm

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